Office of the Commissioner of Official Languages | Commissariat aux langues officielles

**Ottawa, October 5, 2000**

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**An unacceptable situation: Major change required**
***Annual Report 1999-2000 of the Commissioner of Official Languages***

Today the Commissioner of Official Languages, Dr. Dyane Adam, tabled her first annual report in Parliament. In addition to outlining the principal activities that she and her predecessor, Dr. Victor C. Goldbloom, carried out between January 1999 and March 2000, the report identifies the areas to which the Commissioner intends to assign priority at this, the beginning of her term.

Despite some significant progress, Dr. Adam finds the track record of the year less than stellar. The Office of the Commissioner received some 1800 complaints in the past 15 months. In addition, recent government transformations have continued to have a negative impact on respect for language rights, and there is a chronic lack of in-depth follow-up on recommendations made by the Commissioner. "It is unacceptable, after three decades and despite numerous interventions by successive Commissioners, that, year after year, we have to call attention to so many recurring deficiencies in federal offices designated to provide service in both official languages and have to decry the persistent inertia of federal institutions," Dr. Adam said.

For the Commissioner, the picture is clear: overall, there is a lack of firm and true commitment and leadership by the federal government with regard to the full implementation of the *Official Languages Act*, both on the part of political leaders and senior officials. While institutions generally respond to the deficiencies identified by the Office of the Commissioner, Dr. Adam finds that the corrective measures taken are superficial and do not change the real nature of the problems, which recur. What is more, a number of federal institutions have a passive, if not defensive attitude towards their linguistic obligations and they do not fully meet those related to the development of the English and French linguistic minority communities.

The Commissioner believes that major changes are required to restore linguistic duality as a central priority and that such changes can take place only with concrete political and administrative leadership. Dr. Adam points out that the federal government is the guardian and promoter of the fundamental values of Canadian identity, which include linguistic duality and the protection of the official language minorities. It alone can play this role, which is critical to the integrity of the country. "Above and beyond legislation and general principles, our politicians and senior public servants must reaffirm their commitment and set an example by integrating official languages as a fundamental value of Canada into their speeches, their vision and their practices." The Commissioner therefore calls upon the Government to provide renewed leadership by adopting a comprehensive plan based on co-ordination among all federal institutions and co-operation with the minority communities to implement the principles set out in the Act and the Canadian Constitution.

In contrast to the numerous deficiencies in the implementation of the Act, Dr. Adam is pleased to see that there have been some promising breakthroughs in the past year. While the airline industry was

undergoing major restructuring, the Minister of Transport and his Department took action to protect the public's right to be served in either official language by Air Canada and its regional carriers. Western Economic Diversification Canada was innovative in creating agencies in each of the four western provinces that recognize the role of French-speaking communities in economic development. As well, the Committee of Deputy Ministers on Official Languages adopted a broader mandate and defined its strategic priorities.

To actively encourage renewal in official languages, the Commissioner intends to redirect the focus of her activities. While continuing to receive and investigate complaints, she intends to diversify her field of action by specifically targeting the transformation of the culture of federal institutions as regards linguistic duality. To her role as ombudsman she will add the roles of agent of change and educator.

In the past year, the Commissioner has intervened in numerous issues affecting the language rights of Canadians: the restructuring of the airline industry; the presence of the two official languages on the Internet; the reform of the education system in New Brunswick; and municipal amalgamations in Quebec and Ontario, especially in the National Capital, to name just a few. In addition, the Office of the Commissioner intervened in two major court remedy cases before the Supreme Court in which the Court confirmed and clarified the scope of language rights.

The Commissioner is confident that the many challenges outlined in this report can be met with the co-operation of all partners: "By working together we will find the most long-lasting solutions and the most effective means to ensure the vitality of the minority communities and to strengthen linguistic duality in Canada."

-30-

Information

Commissioner's Representatives

**Backgrounder**

**Merit List of Positive Achievements**

The Commissioner notes in her annual report that recurring and sometimes systemic problems prevent the full implementation of the *Official Languages Act*. Dr. Adam encourages the federal government to reaffirm its leadership in the area of official languages and to adopt a renewed vision, together with a comprehensive plan to implement it.

Nevertheless, certain concrete actions taken by departments and agencies over the past year deserve to be recognized and applauded because they help to strengthen linguistic duality and the vitality of the minority communities in Canada.

**New guarantees for airline passengers (Department of Transport)**

- While the airline industry in Canada was undergoing major restructuring, the Minister of Transport and his Department took action to protect the public's right to be served in either official language by air carriers. The legislative changes confirm that the *Official Languages Act* continues to apply to Air Canada and add several provisions specifying the new linguistic obligations applicable to the Corporation's subsidiaries. This initiative deserves to be singled out, even though these legislative changes have not solved all the issues related to compliance by Air Canada with the *Official Languages Act*.
- The Department has made efforts in the past year to improve the provision of service in both

official languages at pre-boarding screening points in airports. Among other things, Transport Canada has undertaken to review the regulations adopted under the *Aeronautics Act* to impose fines on airlines when passengers' language rights are not respected at security screening points.

**Improved customer service in the Montreal-Ottawa-Toronto triangle (Via Rail)**

In the past year, Via Rail has taken concrete measures to improve service to its customers in both official languages. As a result, the Commissioner withdrew a court remedy action under way since 1991.

**Renewed leadership (Committee of Deputy Ministers on Official Languages (CDMOL))**

The Commissioner is pleased to see that the Committee has adopted a broader mandate and identified strategic priorities and objectives to guide federal institutions. The CDMOL, which now has a permanent secretariat, proposes to "provide integrated leadership and constitute a high-level forum on official languages issues within Canada's machinery of government." In February 2000, the CDMOL adopted four strategic priorities: renewed vision, French content on the Internet, health and the minority communities, and language of work. This is an initiative worth following that augurs well for renewed leadership with regard to the official languages.

**Bilingual Games (XIII$^{th}$ Pan-American Games/Canadian Heritage)**

The Pan-American Games in Winnipeg in July 1999 illustrate how official languages can be integrated into sports activities to the benefit of all participants and spectators. The Games were a linguistic success because the organizers planned ahead for linguistic services and committed enough financial and human resources to ensure that they could be delivered.

**French on the Internet (Canadian Heritage)**

On behalf of the Government, Canadian Heritage responded promptly to the recommendations made by the Commissioner in her study *The Government of Canada and French on the Internet*, published in August 1999. Canadian Heritage is co-ordinating the development of an action plan with time lines, follow-up mechanisms and regular progress reports in order to increase French-language content and services on the Internet. The Government made a commitment in its last budget to invest more than $75 million in the digitization of federal collections of heritage interest. The Minister of Canadian Heritage indicated that half of this sum would be devoted to French-language collections.

**Closer relations with minority communities**

Finally, the Commissioner wishes to draw attention to the progress made by three departments in developing closer relations with the minority communities. By working in close co-operation with the communities, these institutions set an example of the approach that should be adopted government-wide to contribute to the development and vitality of the English and French linguistic minorities in various areas of activity.

**Human Resources Development Canada**

The National Committee for Canadian Francophonie Human Resource Development and the Human Resources Regional Table of the English Language Community in Quebec are exemplary co-ordination agencies consisting of representatives of the communities and the federal government working to develop a joint vision and objectives.

**Health Canada**

Health Canada also developed closer relations with the official language minority communities this year by creating a consultative committee. This committee's work will enable the Department and its partners

to better meet the needs of the French-speaking minority communities.

**Western Economic Diversification Canada**

This department has established economic development agencies for the French-speaking community in each of the four western provinces. These agencies have ongoing funding and administer SMB assistance funds.

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